

## Making History

You can make history or study it, and a few lucky people like Winston Churchill do both.

There is a third and more terrible possibility, devised in the nineteenth century and flourishing and expiring in the twentieth. It is to make of History with a capital H a cause to live and die for, and it was once the indispensable impulse of the totalitarian idea. History is your master. You shake your manacles gratefully, rejoice in your submission, and obey.

The mood can still be recalled, and its origins are German. At the University of Berlin after 1818 Hegel was acknowledged its supreme theorist; the young Karl Marx, when he discovered communism in the early 1840s, excitedly called it the answer to the age-old riddle of history, and by the 1930s thousands of intellectuals in many lands had answered the call. In 1934, in a poem called 'The Road These Times must Take', Cecil Day-Lewis summed it up in a poem which in his last years as poet laureate he did not reprint. Why, he asked, does meeting a communist make you feel small? 'There fall from him shadows of what he is building,' said Day-Lewis, and he is 'the future walking to meet us all.'

Submission to History mirrored submission to the divine will. Years later Whittaker Chambers in his memoir *Witness* (1952) recalled how in his New York youth the promise of communism had sounded as beguiling to his ear as the serpent's whisper in the garden of Eden. 'Ye shall be as the gods.' It conferred power; man's mind had replaced God as the supreme creative intelligence, and the October Revolution of 1917 had thrown down an inescapable challenge: 'Have you the moral strength to take upon yourself the crimes of history so that man may close his chronicle of age-old, senseless suffering and replace it with a purpose and a plan?' Or, as Bertolt Brecht put it uncompromisingly in *Die Massnahme* (1930), 'Embrace the butcher.'

It was a challenge promptly answered. Adolf Hitler, who often spoke privately of how much he owed to Marxism, adapted the inevitable laws of history to the destiny of the German people. There is a dazzling account of his gifts as a theorist by Arnold Toynbee in his *Acquaintances* (1967); called 'A Lecture by Hitler' it tells of a private visit by invitation to

the Chancellery in February 1936, a week before Hitler remilitarised the Rhineland. As a London professor Toynbee had never heard anything like it. No one else was present in that room in Berlin in 1936 except a handful of party members who sat in respectful silence, and it lasted for more than two hours with only one interruption, from Toynbee himself: an eloquent historical chronicle of Europe since the sixth-century Merovingians that celebrated a thousand years of German guardianship of Europe against the hordes of Asia, delivered without notes and with a spontaneous lucidity Toynbee had never known in his academic life. National Socialism, Hitler explained, would rival Marxism and outdo it. It would reject cosmopolitanism in favour of the inevitable hegemony of the German people.

Marred only by moments of hysteria as he mentioned the detested name of Russia, when his voice rose to a scream, Hitler's private lecture to a London professor made Russia, not communism, the arch-enemy of his life mission. Marxism had taught him obedience to the laws of history, and he remained faithful. In *Spandau* (1976) Albert Speer recalls how in January 1943, at the height of his war against the Soviet Union, Hitler remarked that Franco headed a 'reactionary crew' in Spain where idealism lay entirely with the Reds, adding that one day he would begin the Spanish civil war again 'with us on the other side', fighting reaction shoulder to shoulder with the communists. But all that must wait. First the Slavic hordes of Asia, Tsarist or communist, that blocked his path must go.

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With the Soviet collapse of 1989 historical inevitability ceased to be a fashionable notion. Nobody speaks of Scientific Socialism now, and few (in spite of bank failures) of the world-wide doom of capitalism. A dogma that once seduced an intelligentsia lies shattered like a museum-piece. On the other hand it can be interesting to fit the pieces into place, and Isaiah Berlin attempted it in papers collected after his death as *The Soviet Mind* (2004). It is a case to consider.

Isaiah Berlin was born in Riga in 1909, and his native languages were Russian and German; during the first world war his family moved to Petrograd out of the path of the German imperial army. During the war against Hitler he worked in the British Embassy in Washington and in 1945, for six months, in Moscow, eventually pursuing an academic career in Oxford till his death in 1997. The best remembered of his books is *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (1953) which divides thinkers into two kinds: hedgehogs who know one big thing, foxes who know many. Stalin and Hitler were hedgehogs in acknowledging the master-idea of class or race; parliamentary systems are full of foxes.

Ideologies promote hedgehogs. At its most seductive an ideology can sound complex, but in essence it remains simple, single and above all portable, sometimes acquired in minutes by a brief exchange with a friend or a stranger. It may encourage study and reflection, but it does not characteristically or necessarily require them. Life, by contrast, tends to be complex, and Berlin, who lived to be the first Master of Wolfson College, Oxford and president of the British Academy, had ample opportunities to study its complexities – appalled to his dying day by the gullibility of those who comfortably inhabit lands that have never known dictators. Ignorance can be deliberate and cultivated. Few know or wish to be told that when the Nazis occupied eastern Europe in 1941, notably Poland, Ukraine and the Baltic states, they borrowed extermination techniques from their Soviet allies and later admitted it; or that Rudolf Hoess, writing his memoir *Commandant of Auschwitz* (1958) as he awaited execution in a Polish prison after the war, had gathered information during the war from escapees of the Soviet camps for the Nazis to use in their own shorter, sharper programme of death. The holocaust was inspired by Stalin, and in conversation Hitler freely admitted that National Socialism was based on Marx; he praised the Soviet leader as a genius, and after 1945 the Soviets used former Nazi camps like Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen for five years for their original purpose. Two rival dictators destroyed each other, in the end, but not before they had emulated one another.

Lenin and Stalin, Hitler and Mao Tse-Tung proudly saw themselves as the instruments of history. Hitler's target was Zionism, Stalin's and Mao's the bourgeoisie, and Berlin's case was that they created the evidence by which they chose to act. They created history by ordering it to be done. A Jewish world conspiracy must exist, the Nazis argued, whether evidence could be found for it or not; Stalin believed the bourgeoisie must be destroyed because Marx had said so, and kulaks (being rich) were bourgeois. History, duly capitalised, became fact by the will of those who ruled. In 1952 Berlin wrote an article signed 'O. Utis', which is Greek for nobody – Stalin still had months to live – called 'The Artificial Dialectic', where he showed with shattering clarity how it was done.

As a dedicated Marxist Stalin feared that the Marxian dialectic – thesis, antithesis, synthesis – might some day turn against him and threaten the system he had inherited from Lenin. He therefore determined to create his own. 'As others produced artificial rubber and mechanical brains,' wrote Berlin, so did Stalin's purges create 'an artificial dialectic whose results the experimenter himself could in a large degree control and predict.' He was like a marksman painting the target around the place where the bullet had already struck.

Hitler was deeply impressed, and followed him. In the summer of 1941, when he resolved to attack his Soviet ally, he persuaded himself that the Jews had treacherously devised a way to land Germany once again in a war on two fronts. The Stalinist terror had already happened, or most of it, and may have been some three times as large as the Nazi holocaust that would soon murder nine millions. Neither disaster was the sudden quirk of a dictator's mind; both had been inspired by a Rhineland exile writing in the British Museum after 1849.

The toll was vast, and *The Soviet Mind* reverberates with the agonies of those who suffered and the grief of those who survived: Osip Mandelstam, a poet who died in a Siberian camp in 1938; the novelist Boris Pasternak; and the poet Anna Akhmatova, whom Berlin met during his time at the British Embassy at the end of the war. Their secret meeting in Leningrad in 1945 was dangerously interrupted by Randolph Churchill, of all people, shouting indiscreetly from the courtyard below, and it is touching to learn that Akhmatova in private recited two cantos of Byron's *Don Juan* from memory. Berlin pays homage to them all, living and dead, revisiting the land of his childhood after two revolutions and two devastating wars as one who had never ceased to admire the intellectual zest of 'the most imaginative and least narrow of peoples.' Russian was his first language, but he was a stranger there – a British academic of Latvian birth who had spent his adult life in England and the United States. Diplomatic immunity protected him but not them, and their courage astounded and terrified him. This was an intelligentsia under deep freeze, though minds stirred under the socialist permafrost among those prudent enough to avoid public contention and brave enough to meet in secret places.

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The Soviet collapse of 1989 was a collapse of theory, and the theory was called History. It was in that name that Stalin massacred by the tens of million, and a theory devised a century earlier in western Europe became a blueprint for state policy in eastern lands. Strange, however, to recall that the Soviet Union did not die because it was brutal. It died because it failed to produce and distribute – a supreme irony, since Marx had claimed to be the first to link the theory of class to theories of production. Socialism proved to be a military doctrine, in the event, and Trotsky, Zhukov and Mao were brilliant tacticians and strategists. Economics was a different matter. Stalin and Mao could not govern; nor could their successors. By the 1980s it was too late to amend or reform, and the Soviet economy, hopelessly outpaced, had nothing to do but to die.

The lessons of that failure are still to be pondered. As an incident

in European history only National Socialism is more improbable than Bolshevism; but Bolshevik rule lasted far longer and conquered far wider – the proletariat has no fatherland – and more clearly than Nazism it was the idea of a world-wide intelligentsia in love with a theory. It looked all-knowing in its day; it flourished as an abstraction and because it was that. Outside religion there has never been anything more compelling or less sane.

Events, however, were disobliging, and no class wars – never a one – followed an industrial revolution anywhere on earth. This was history that did not happen; as a theory Marxism proved a catastrophic dud. Far from impoverishing the working class, free markets encouraged them to grow rich, and to the dismay of ideologues they welcomed it. If history is about what happened, History was about what did not happen. ‘People who make history know nothing about history,’ G.K. Chesterton once quipped. ‘You can see that in the sort of history they make.’ What they made was an eternal warning, a hecatomb of dead bones.

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